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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

THE SHIFTING STATUS OF THE GONDAR AZMARI IN REVOLUTIONARY ETHIOPIA: FROM OUTCASTS TO POPULAR STARS

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the 1974 revolution and its impact on the fate of the azmari and contemporary singers in north Gondar Zone. The research is based on primary and secondary sources, including interviews, archival and relevant secondary sources. Such sources were crosschecked and triangulated for substance and objectivity. During imperial times the azmari were among the despised segment of the Ethiopian society due to their profession. Conversely, they were important components of the Ethiopian nationhood in reflecting and recording feelings such as grievances and happiness of the populace.. Contemporary social and political changes following the revolution of 1974 transformed the azmari's social and economic life, as the change granted equality among people regardless of occupation and birth. This, coupled with a growing sense of cultural awareness at home and the emergence of an Ethiopian diaspora in various parts of the world, helped the azmari to assume a better status and social acceptance. Consequently, the profession of azmari which was previously marginalized and denoted as the occupation of the lower class was transformed to a socially-dignified sector. So much so a growing number of youngsters from a 'non-azmari' ancestry started to join the profession with no qualms.

Keywords: azmari, Ethiopian revolution, Derg, occupational groups, north Gondar zone.

INTRODUCTION

Geographically, North Gondar Zone is a part of the Amhara National Regional State located in the northwestern part of Ethiopia. The zone has been home to diverse people and cultures. One of the most remarkable aspects of highland Ethiopian culture is the *azmari's*² tradition (Abebe, 2002 A.M.; Misganaw, 2011). So far studies hypothesized the origin of the *azmari* in at least three dimensions (Timkehet, 2013), namely external influence, local socio-cultural dimension and the influence of the Ethiopian

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 2. *Azmari* are Ethiopian minstrels, poets and singers who are usually paired (female and male). They are accompanied by a single string instrument called *mesenqo*. In older times they were the 'literate' segment of the society by whom injustice in the community was exposed through the style known as *semina worq*, literally 'wax and gold' (informant Berie; Kimberlin, 2003, pp. 419-20; Ashenafi, 1971, p. 62).

Orthodox Church (Ashenafi, 1971 and 1975; Kawase, 2005). 1975; Kawase, 2005). All agree, however, that the *azmari* tradition is as old as the Ethiopian state. A recent study by Timkehet (2013) delved into the presence of the *azmari* tradition in the Axumite court. Timkehet used an account written by an ambassador of the Byzantine emperor Justinian who was in the court of King Kaleb (514–42 AD) indicating that the king was at the center of the crowd consisting of royal dignitaries and of flute players. This is an interesting evidence to imagine the history of court music usually performed by the *azmari*. An aspect of the *azmari* tradition in Gondar also traced its roots from Axum to Lalibela and Gondar, following the change of political seat of the state (Tigist, 2010, p. 9; Ebrahim, 2013, p. 4).

The *azmaries* of the broader Gondar region also have diverse ideas about their origin. Informants from the village of Burbuax³ and Gondar city say that their origin began with the arrival and gradual settlement of the founding father of the community in the Gondar area. Elders claimed that one “Enzeta” was their founding father and he first settled in Wagara. They also claim that their ancestors had migrated from Jerusalem accompanying the Queen Saba and her son, Minilek I (the founder of the Solomonic Dynasty) to Axum; thereby they emphasize their close relationship with the court. Others speculate that their origins come from Gafat, one of the extinct tribes in Ethiopia. Still there are other traditions connecting the history of this group with that of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. One of such traditions dates back to the times of Saint Yared (fifth century A.D.), when court and religious vocal music was developed when the royal families were required to exercise educational training in the art of versification and vocalization. In keeping with this, those who were unable to pursue their spiritual art within the church abandoned the system and resumed a worldly life, eventually becoming active at the courts of rulers (Ashenafi, 1975; Solomon, 2012; Zenebe, 1987). Therefore, those who were relegated from the religious music (*zema*) and other related performances assumed the responsibility of the *azmaris’* becoming secular performer of

The people with *qine* are called *liqawint* (‘learned’) (on the tradition of *qine* in Gojjam and Gondar see Hiwot Teffera, 2016, p. 18). The ability of *azmari* includes versification, word choice, vivid description of circumstances suddenly as they happened as well as the addition of humor, flattery and a calculated amount of sarcasm, word play and ambiguity (interview with Berie Fulie; Ashenafi, 1971, p. 62).

3. Burbuax is the name of an *azmari* village in Gondar Zuria *wereda* near to Tseda town along the highway that connects Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar with Gondar city. Currently, it is one of the thirty seven *kebele* found in Gondar Zuria. It is bordered by Gondar town in the north direction, Lebo-Kemkem in the south, Dembia *warada* in the west and Misrak Belesa in the east. The village is found 22 kms from Gondar city, 12 kms from the *warada* capital Maksegnit and 5 kms from Tseda town. As to traditions the term Burbuax is derived from the Amharic word “ብር ጥሴ” [let birr money] be on my behalf. As the legend goes, the gebbar (tribute payer) living in that area once failed to pay his tribute to his lord on the designated time. With the absence of anyone over the area to share his guilt and reconcile him to his lord, he passed an oath of money (birr) to his overlord and asked him for another chance to pay. Due to this episode the name of the village was coined (see also Abebe, 2002 A.M; informant: Sisay Bogale).

music. Thus, in northern and central Ethiopia the secular music is believed to have as long history as that of the sacred church song (Timikehet, 2013).

Although the *azmari* were marginalized minorities due to their occupation, traditionally Ethiopian nobilities hired them in their courts and within their households for their entertainment and bridging them with the society in their respective courts. As the saying goes: “አንድ ቄስ ለነብስህ መዳኛ፤ አንድ አዝማሪ ለነብስህ መዝናኛ” (‘a priest to your life after death and an *azmari* to worldly entertainment’(informant *agafari* ⁴ Abebe Ayele). Father Alvarez as cited in Teclehaimanot (1987) reported in 1520 that the *azmari* were in the service of Ethiopian emperors and their dignitaries along with their roving capital. In exchange for their services, the *azmari* were often rewarded with land, cattle and highly valued gifts.

At the turn of the eighteenth century the Scottish traveler James Bruce noted the presence of several *azmari* communities in Gondar-- the then capital of the empire. Gondar in the nineteenth century was also noted for its artful *azmaris* who were skilled in subtle and equivocal use of the language, which only knowledgeable and attentive listeners could truly understand. In addition, *Embilta bar*, the ‘gate of the flute players’, which survives in the annals of Gonderine tradition is one of the twelve gates of the ‘Fasil Ghebbi’, the imperial citadel in Gondar (Solomon, 1985). This endorses the presence of a rich heritage harnessed with the *azmari* tradition in the imperial compound and Gondar area. This has to be noted that the position vested on *azmaris* and their profession in Gondar was also an aspect of the revival of Ethiopian folk culture, at least since the Gondar period.

It must be noted that the emperor, the *abun* and *liquamekuas* were seated side-by-side with their respected plates, wearing the traditional clothes during royal banquets and festivities. In the absence of a *liquamekuas* no one could proceed to the next step, thus showing the importance of the *azmari* in the Ethiopian statehood. Perhaps in keeping with this role the *azmari* of the study area tended to settle near the political headquarters. Thus, the *azmari* settlement in the Gondar area in the seventeenth century seems to have been related to the shift of political power from south to north-western Ethiopia, around the Lake Tana area (Abebe, 2002 A.M.; Misganaw, 2011; Tigist, 2010).

As part of their diverse responsibilities in the society, the *azmaris* were also expected to evoke that message of freedom and inspiration to all corners of the country as well as awaken the public to action in times of local and national crises (Timket 2013, pp. 47-48; Behulum, 2008 A.M., pp. 71-89). The *azmaris*, therefore, played important roles in rebellions and regional uprisings. The following poem reflects this condition of the *azmari* :

⁴. *Agafari* is a honorific royal title given for court subordinates active in court ceremonies in Gondar since seventeenth century. In medieval Ethiopia governors in Semen were called *agafari*; Chernetsov, 2007.

ጠላቱ ጦር ሲመዝ እርሱ በሙዚቃ
በቅኔ አንደበቱ ጠላት የሚያጠቃ
እንዴት ነው አዝማሪው የወንዶች አለቃ
How is the *azmari* doing
Hero of the heroes,
Who attacks his enemy,
Who fights with guns,
(Adugna, 2007 A.M)

Back to Gondarine times, the *azmari* suffered the onslaught of *ras* Mikael Sahul, the son in law of Empress Mintiwab, a powerful king maker in Gondar. The *Ras* is remembered for his tyranny. The *azmari*, who were noted for providing voice for the voiceless, and notorious for their subtle criticism of men of power, fell victims of his wrath. Accordingly, sometime in 1770 a large group of *azmari* were executed (Bruce, 1790, vol. 4, p. 72; see also Ahmed Hassen Omar, 2013, p. 100). Similarly, an *azmari* informant from Gohala, Balasa district, told the researcher that the *azmari* used to carry their machine gun on one side and their melody voice on the other to fight invaders such as the Italians during their occupation from 1935 to 1941 (informant Mebre Belete). It is thus believed that, proportionally the *azmari* suffered more than non *azmari* nationals during times of social and political turmoil.

During the nineteenth century, as Ethiopia's elites and a part of the society embraced modernization, the term *azmari* assumed negative connotations. There is still an ongoing controversy among *azmaris* and the public at large regarding the use of the term *azmari* vis-à-vis other alternative names such as *alemachawach* ('worldly entertainer') to designated Ethiopian minstrels. The origin for this negative connotation is not clear and is still a subject for further research. A hypothesis is that the corrupted nobility-initiated hatred campaigns against the *azmaris* and their profession due to their critical duty in bridging the gaps between the society and the state. Thus, the nobility, not willing to be criticized in public conspired against the *azmaris* and their profession. Significantly, a modern meaning of *azmari* has been that of "one who criticizes and one who defames" (Kimberlin, 2003 p. 420). The spread of this meaning slowly but surely created a stigma for the profession. Later on, other meanings were associated with this profession, such as "the one who talks too much and/or beggar", took their roots in the public sphere.

Interestingly, there is a division among the *azmaris* themselves regarding the term *azmari*. Most of them are pleased to be called *azmari* since the term refers to *azemere*, which means 'the one who praises God'. Others, however, prefer to be called *yalemachewach* ('worldly entertainer') or *enzeta* ('father of *azmari*'), which is common around Gondar, or they even prefer the prestigious name of *legemegas*, given to court entertainers. During the Derg period they came to be called *kinet techewach* which is derived from *kinetibeb* ('art'), and currently the common name is artist (interview with Mebre Belete, Gedefaye, Tekalign). One of the leading figures in folk music and poetry in Gondar, Yirga Dubale, stated publicly that he is more comfortable with the name *azmari* than *alemachawach*. He utterly agrees with the etymology of the term coming from the Geez term *azemere*, the one

who praises God. *Almachewach* for him denotes “a sort of puppet character” and superficial which was a recent derivative for *azmari*. He did not accept the negative connotation envisaged behind *azmari* which meant a talkative person and beggar (Yirga’s interview with ETV).

To sum up, the profession of *azmari* in Ethiopia is a living witness of music, culture, knowledge and communication. Powne, for instance, referred to the *azmari* as “historical, social and political commentators as well as carriers of the epic of the past” (1968, p. 67). Some informants went to the extent of saying that “God speaks to them” (interview with Mulu Worku and Radu Bizuneh). The *azmari* can be seen as a sort of carriers of the identity of Ethiopians and servants of the society in various occasions of life. *Azmari* songs that induce memory and identity hold a significant place in the musical culture of the region.

THE AZMARI AND THE 1974 REVOLUTION

It is usually stated that with the consolidation of the imperial government in the 1950s to the late 1960s, interest in the arts flourished more than ever before in the country. This was partly due to the emperor’s zeal to introduce western art and entertainment. Instances of it were orchestras, bands and the use of radio and television. Following such developments, for instance, a territorial army orchestra was established.⁵ However, the situation did not bring about a positive change in the views the wider public held on the *azmari* profession. Musicians playing western instruments were more highly valued than traditional performers. Accordingly, playing western instruments was mostly done by members of the emerging middle class. Dependency on western instruments seems to have had a discouraging influence upon Ethiopian traditional musical instruments and their experts (interview with Sisay Bogale; Kimberlin, 2003, p. 420). Therefore, the modernization steps undertaken under Haile Sillase I exacerbated rather than reduced the marginalization of the *azmari*.

Since the emergence of feudalism up to the revolution of 1974, most of the occupational communities such as the *azmari* accepted their low social status and took their gloomy fate for granted (Kimberlin, 2003, pp. 419-420). In the history of their marginalization, the fate of the *azmari* community, like that of other minorities, has been accepted for weal or for woe by the political, religious and historical dynamics of the country .

5. Ashenafi’s remark on such development associated with the introduction of modern music since 1920s in Ethiopia to “civilized the country in the manner of the west” eventually pheripherized *azmari* culture. As part the political zeal to establish a centralized state the military music band set up by *ras* Teferi Mekonen (the later Emperor Haile Sillase I) was organized by foreigners, which marked the beginning of modern secular music in Ethiopia. Traditional musical instruments strongly associated with *azmari* music, such as *mesenqo* (fiddle) and *kirar* (bowl lyre), rarely played a part in modern bands. This provoked a set back in the roles of *azmari* (Behulum, 2008). Those dedicated to a century-old art were no longer encouraged by the elites in the top socio political hierarchy to keep playing (Ashenafi, 1976, pp. 290-301).

I argue that the change which engulfed Ethiopian society following the revolution left far-reaching consequences. According to historian Gebru Tareke “the revolution of 1974 was arguably the most pivotal event in contemporary Ethiopian history” (Gebru, 2016, p.34). The revolution was first dictated by students and the intelligentsia, then slowly but surely was joined by the military segment, which finally swallowed the fruits of the change in its own favor. The revolution also left a profound impact on the *azmari* profession .

For the *azmari*, as for other traditional professions, the biggest revival of Ethiopian music had to wait until the outbreak of the revolution. Thus, the military government, after taking over political power from the revolutionary groups, framed a strategy called “cultural revolutionary transformation” [ኣብዮታዊ የባህል ለውጥ *Abiyotawi yabahil lewuṭ*]. One of the main components of this ‘cultural revolution’ was the rebirth of Ethiopian cultural music, such as war songs. The aim of the military junta was to inspire and create a link between the past and the present for the benefit of the revolution (interview with Hailu Eshetie and Wagnew Tebeje). The government believed that only with such an amalgamation of the past and the present the revolution could succeed in its dual goals of maintaining territorial integrity and tackling poverty (*Zena bahil*, 1978 A.M.).

Some studies have argued that change-driven transformation might compromise the established traditions of which music is a part (Zenebe, 1987). Similarly, what was central to the revolutionary military regime policy was to do away with traditional hierarchies, beliefs and spiritual heritages and to transform the country into a Socialist state. Correspondingly, the junta made a serious attempt to integrate the despised *azmari* within the local communities. The transformation campaign and propaganda outlawed the previous traditions of marginalization in terms of birth, occupation and language. Following this, the profession of the *azmari*, which was enjoyed by the majority on specific occasions but despised⁶ and confined itself to the *azmari* ancestry, now started to be respected and eventually open to anyone who was interested and wished to join in (interview with Bere Fule, Sisay Bogale, Hailu Eshetie, and Wagnew Tebeje).

The radical actions taken by the military junta to some degree elevated the status of the *azmaris* and changed their self-perception. Also, public perceptions towards the *azmaris*, who had traditionally been seen as people

⁶ In praising the change brought by the revolution in contrast to the imperial times, a renowned *kirar* player and singer Asnakech Worku summarized her experience as follows : “Living with the imperial period was a difficult moment to express feelings and inclinations towards art. Families were pre-occupied with the fact that music was despised and an occupation of the poor and the minority. Being in the arts meant accepting the essence of public insult called “*azmari (areho)*”. As such, people did not want to be called by this name, although they had deep passion towards music and performance.” (Ministry of Culture Newsletter, 1978 A.M., p. 32). It is with and after the revolution that the present relaxed status of relationship between *azmari* and non-*azmari* in marriage and occupation assumed a new chapter (Ibid.).

with “special powers”, “creativity” and belonging to “a different race”, faded away. It is in this way that we can understand the present situation and development in the music industry in the study area as well as in the nation. Informants attributed to the transformations brought about by the revolution the ending of the public perception of stigma and marginalization. The following popular poem, which was sung during those revolutionary times, conveys the emphasis political leaders placed in spurring respect for the working professionals, who were once seen as despised and inferior:

ሁሉም በየስራው በየችሎታው
ይነሳና ይሰራ ስራነው እኩረው።
Let all stand for profession and ability
Wake up for that it is the means to be proud.
(Interview with Etihun Gebrehiwot)

In the new social vision brought about by the revolution, professions were given their due respect. Hence, being engaged in a profession was heralded as a prestigious thing, since it would bring benefits to the society. Thus, the new political scenario encouraged people to work hard pursuing their interests, including traditional music, which once had been marginalized.

Most importantly, the 1975 land reform granted the marginalized groups access to land under the name of “public ownership of rural land proclamation” (Mengistu, 2015; Desalegn, 2009; Feqade, 2003; Getie, 1999). The land reform instituted by the regime helped the government win the support of the poor such as the *azmari* communities who during the imperial regime had not been allowed to possess land. In many instances, the *azmari* community even assumed leadership positions in local peasant associations, co-operatives and art affairs such as the *kinet* (interview with Sisay Bogale, Sileshi Demlew and Etihun Gebrehiwot). .

THE KINET SYSTEM

As part of the principle of socialism, the Derg organized communities in associations. In the realm of music these associations took the name of *kinet*, a word derived from the Amharic compound term ክነ ጥበብ (*kine t'ibeb*), which can be loosely translated as ‘art’ but that can encompass much varied activities as literature, painting, minting, music, theater and cinema (interview with Shimeles Demlew). The idea of association in the form of an organized music band at least in Gondar city was framed by the local *azmaris* owing to direct government intervention. The presence of an abundant *azmari* community in Gondar made the process of *kinet* association relatively easier compared to other areas.

From 1975 to 1983 at least three different names were given to what ultimately would be called Fasiledes *kinet* group in the city of Gondar. In 1975 fifty seven male and six female *azmari* gathered under the shadow of Jantekel *warka*, a huge oak tree and a historical site in downtown Gondar near the imperial compound, to form the local *kinet* association that they called “Taglo atagay” (ታግሎ አታጋይ, ‘Fighter and agitator’). Four years later it

was followed by the “Ras Dashen” kinet. Finally, in 1983, the “Fasiledes” kinet came to light, which eventually will be the one reaching the widest popularity in Gondar province as well as in Ethiopia (Letter to G/P/A Bureau, 1973 A.M., No. 918/ ከ37/69 date 8/2/73 A.M.; Fasiledes kinet 1979 A.M.). Fasiledes kinet was a contemporary of other big cultural institutions of the period from various provinces of Ethiopia; these included Gishe Abay from Gojjam, Lalibela from Wallo and Baso from Jimma. The renowned azmari, Yirga Dubale was its leader and one of the mentors of new recruits from the schooling system (interview with Tilahun Melese, Yalew Melese, Worku Gessesse and Berie Fulie; Yirga’s interview with ETV; G/P/Fasiledas Kinet: File 87/36/30/5-9/12/67 A.M.).

Due to their oral skills and the beauty of their own musical performances, the *azmaris* and the *kinet* groups were considered by the state machinery as the main agents of political propaganda. They were meant to play a pivotal role in crafting revolutionary verses and songs that would inspire the public to support the political project. Accordingly, the *azmaris* praised the changes brought about by the revolution at the expense of the troubles of the imperial times, as the following verse states:

የመሳፍንት ስርዓት ጅቡ ሊበላኝ
ለውጡ ወለላ ነው ሁሉን አሳየኝ
The revolution is kind enough
to show me the blessings of changes,
While under the system of the nobility
the hyena was ready to devour me
(Interview with *immahoy* Radu Bizuneh).

A contemporary government document preserved at the Gondar departmental archives was adamant about the important political role attributed to the *kinet*:

....የኪነት ባለሙያዎች በፍቃደኝነታቸው ተሰባስበው በማህበር መሰል መገናኛ አቋቁመው “ታግሎ አታጋይ” በሚል ስያሜ ሻል ያለ የተደራጀ የኪነት እንቅስቃሴ ማድረግ ጀመሩ.....” የአብዮቱን ፍሬዎች ለህዝቡ ለማስረፅ ሚናቸው የጎላ ነው::”
Kinet professionals in the area congregated to organize themselves in the form of an association. They called their association *taglo atagay* [‘fighter and agitator’]. The *kinet* members can play a great role in disseminating the outcome of the revolution.
(Fasiledes *kinet*, 1980 A.M.)

Thus, the government promoted the development of these musical groups not for the sake of the art itself but rather as potential instruments in the dissemination of the objectives of the socialist ideology.

The government supervision of this system is exemplified by the case of the Taglo Atagay *kinet*, the first to have been established in Gondar. One year after its foundation, the *kinet* was on the verge of dissolving due to financial reasons. Yet, in 1977 it was reestablished with direct support from the Ministry of Culture. Trainers like *ato* Awlacheu Dejene, Teshome Demisie, Tadesse Worku and Negash Abdu were also assigned by the Ministry.

Soon various local *kinet* were sent to several war fronts where the armies of the Derg were active. Thus, Fasiledes *kinet* made a widely broadcasted performance in Karamara, where the Derg had just waged a decisive victory against the expansionist army of Seid Bere of Somalia in 1978/79. With this performance Fasiledes won the national hero award. Members of the same music team such as Yirga Dubale⁷, Wassie Kassa, and Tamagn Beyene were also in Eritrea during the Operation Red Star (Addis Zemen, 1972 A.M.).

Several of the members of Fasiledes *kinet* actively participated in the *Hizib lehizib* ('people to people') campaign, a programme that brought together the people, cultures and traditions of Ethiopia. Thus, from May 15 to 28, 1987 the Fasiledes performed in Debre Markos, Gojjam. Three different productions were staged there on the occasion of the inauguration ceremony of the local stadium. Further seven performances were made in other sites and cities of Gojjam including Dejen town, Yetnora farmers



Figure 1: the kebele kinet during a performance in Gondar town

Source: Gondar Town Council report, 1986, North Gondar Archive Center.

cooperatives, Finot Selam, Dangla, Bure Damot, and Birsheloqo agriculture development site. In addition, for at least three months, from February 20 to May 8, 1988, the Fasiledes group toured across several provinces in the

⁷ Yirga Dubale became a prominent figure within the Derg's musical propaganda and one of the main leaders of the Fasiledas *kinet* since its inception. The following 'war chant' (*qererto*) sung by him became very popular among the public and government officials in the late 1970s: የፍየል ወጣጥ ልቡ ያበጠበት ናእንዋጋ ብሎ ለነብሩ ለከበት ('A young goat crammed only with emotion, sent message to battle with a tiger'). The couplet associated the tiger with the military government and the young goat with the forces of students and intellectuals who later came to be called EPRP (Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party, 'Thapa' in Amharic acronym) and who were critical of Derg. The verse rejoices the despotic power of the junta as opposed to the weak opposition (Werku Gessesse and Radu Bizunch; Fasiledes *kinet*, 1980 A.M) .



Figure 2: *The Fasiledes kinet during one of its performances; in the caption: 'Gondar folk music performing group; kinet in Gondar'*
 Source: Addis Zemen newspaper, Nehasie 9, 1972 A.M.

country (Fasiledes *kinet*, 1980 A.M.). The campaign also included an international tour across fifty-two countries that spanned for four months. The tour made the artists of Fasiledes *kinet* known to the Ethiopian diaspora public. Some of the key performers during this tour were Eneye Takele, Abebe Belew, Yirga Dubale, Tamagn Beyene, Wasie Kassa, Abdela Hussien, and Kenubish Abebe. Progressively, the *kinet* system was established in several areas of Ethiopia without any restriction and so everybody interested in art and music was allowed to participate. The system was organized according to the new administrative division set up by the Derg, from the *qebele* (smallest district), going through the *warada* and *awrajja* up to the *kiflahager* (province) levels. Many young performers were recruited from elementary and high schools to join *warada* or *awrajja kinet* groups. As the system was growing and getting more established the best recruits moved upwards, from the local to the district or province levels. In parallel, there was also a provincial system of recruitment for the national theatre in Addis Abeba (Solomon, 2012 informants Tilahun Melese, Yalew Melese). Most of the musicians and art professionals currently active in Ethiopia are the product of this system.⁸

⁸. Among the contemporary musicians and stage performers at the national level who came of age artistically within the Gondar *kinet* Tamagn Beyene, Abebe Belew, Eniye Takel, Abebe Birhane, Asefu Debalke, Kenubish Abebe, and Selamawit Nega can be mentioned (NGZAC, 8/2/73 A.M.; Informants Berie, Sisay and Worku). Current stars who began their careers within the same system are Fekire Adis Neqatibeb, Yeshiwork Cheqile, Manalemosh Dibo, Madingo Afework, and Amsal Mitike.

Eventually village youth groups such as ‘All Ethiopian Youth Associations’ (የመላው ኢትዮጵያ ወታደራዊ ማህበረሰብ), alongside with the leadership of professional azmaris were to bring the frontier of folk music and musical drama further into the Ethiopian society than ever before. The kinet system laid the ground for the development of cultural music in its indigenous form. The azmari became true mentors of the folk music in which they were well versed. Thus, informants remember vividly the role of azmari Yirga Dubale and Wassie Kassa as well as of Fasiledes kinet for their original representation of Gondar culture. Increasing amateurism in art was also a crucial aspect of Fasiledes kinet (Fasiledes kinet, 1980 A.M).

PUBLIC DILEMMA AND CHANGE

From the outset, the Derg promised equality, political freedom and rapid economic development for the people. However, with the exception of the land reform which blessed land to the tillers, other social and political rights remained curtailed (Getie, 1999; Desalegn, 2009; Feqade, 2003).



Figure 3: A young kinet group in Gondar town bringing their share in the revolution.
Source: Gondar Town Council report, 1986, North Gondar Archive Center.

I Informants agree in that the military government granted some rights, yet change was not as it was promised at the beginning (interview with Worku Gessesse and Berie Fulie). The same informants underpin the totalitarian and suppressive nature of the state throughout its tenure. Thus, the artists were often frightened for some of the words they said commenting on unjust practices of the government. Most of the founders of Fasiledes kinet, who worked for a long time on the side of the state, turned against it and formed underground opposition cells. The change of mind by kinet members happened due to a marked increase of insecurity and severe political disruption in the region and the country. Some of the kinet people deserted as occasions allowed them (interview with Sitina Mustefa, Mulu Berhe and Mulu Alemu). According to government reports of the time some

left to Addis Ababa in search of better jobs, but the primary issue was not the question of job rather that of escaping political suppressions and other related injustices held elsewhere (Letter to P/A/ from Culture and Sport Bureau Gondar Branch 1981 A.M Letter no, 689/h/3/69; Fasiledes kinet, 1980 A.M; interview with Mulu Alemu, Sitina Mustefa, Mulu Berhe).

Prominent figures such as Yirga Dubale exiled after confronting officials with his verses. Yirga was one of the leading folk music legends in Gondar and Ethiopia in 1960s, 70s and 80s. He was an *azmari* to whom nature has bestowed magnificent vocal and musical soul coupled with knowledge of culture and versification. Yirga worked for years to realize the unrealized promises of the revolution, taking various responsibilities in the kinet group. Eventually, he found that the things were not as promised. The devastating revolutionary civil war in the midst of a poverty-stricken society, corruption and other related practices in the country, inspired him to change his mind. So before migrating to Israel in 1988 he improvised the following verses against the system:

ያሳማ ገበሬ የዝንጀሮ ገልጓይ ፣የጅብ ዘር አቀባይ
አንዱ ካንዱ አይሻል ሁሉም እንብላው ባይ
Pig the tiller, monkey the digger and hyena
the one brings seeds for the farm
Oh! All are the same they only know eating
(Interview with Yirga Dubale ETV)

The above animals are not known to perform such practices as in the first line. In reality it is the second line that applies to them. Therewith the poet is ridiculing the system by representing the state machinery with the mentioned animals usually known by their excessive consumption of food. In such a way he criticized the system as corrupt and brutal. The earlier hopes and promises of the revolution slowly but surely dwindled.

With the demise of the military government in 1991 and the success stories of the then transitional government, Yirga capitalized the new situation in the following poem:

አንት ሽግግር መንግስት አሁን ለምንድነው ግብር የጠራኸኝ
ይበቃኝ የለም ወይ ነፃ ያወጣኸኝ
Ho! You transitional government why you call me for such lavish event?
My gratitude to you! Liberation is enough.
(Interview with Yirga Dubale ETV)

In the verse, the artist wanted to convey the level of suppression in the military government. The poet also cheered the victory made by EPDRF in the long incessant civil war over the Derg regime. He also praised the eventual establishment of the transitional government that welcomed Yirga, who was in exile. A number of informants shared the same views about the suppressive and corrupt nature of the state that subsequently culminated with its total collapse in 1991 (interview with Worku and Berie).

In spite of the tragic end of the Derg regime and hence of its socio-cultural reforms, this period brought marked changes in the lives of the *azmari* community. Informants have words to praise the revolution, reporting that the arts and crafts had been encouraged. The revolution enabled them to access land which was once rarely granted to minorities, they could work in night clubs if that is their interest, publish cassettes to sell in order to support themselves. In earlier times they did not intermarry with non *azmari*, who were downgraded by the wider society as “backward”. Accordingly, the community referred to *azmari* as if they were from a different race and having supernatural power. Informants summarized their views on the revolution as it opened their minds for a new insight (interview with Tilahun Melese, Yalew Melese, Worku Gessesse, and Berie Fulie).

መንፈስን ለማደስ የተፈጠራችሁ
 ሙዚቀኞች ሁሉ እንደምንአላችሁ
 Those of you born to refresh soul,
 How are you musicians?
 (Interview with Berie Fulie)

The verses reflect on the transformation brought about in the public perception to music and musicians. Many informants outside the *azmari* community assert that social interaction with the *azmari* and the non-*azmari* showed significant changes. Issues related to marginalization as well as hatred are now almost non-existent.

Nevertheless, some threats to the *azmari* traditional values and lifestyle also appeared as a consequence of revolutionary changes. Some of the changes revealed to be paradoxical for the *azmari* communities. Thus, for instance, the expansion of modern education became both an opportunity and a threat. Accordingly, the young generations are engaged in schools which do not encourage the development of traditional knowledge, skills and attitudes, such as those embodied in the music and arts of the *azmari*. Interviewees are keen to argue that their children are now abandoning the tradition of *azmarinat* because everybody is thinking of modern education as a means to hire oneself in government offices rather than thinking of self-sufficiency and self-reliance as it was the case of the *azmari* in the past. Students have few feelings for the tradition and put it to the sidelines. In this regard, informants note their gloomy fear towards the future fate of the profession. One elderly informant summarized the situation as follows:

አዝማርነት አደጋ ውስጥ እንደሌለ ነው የሚሰማኝ ፡፡ ራስን ማየት እንደኋለቀርነት እየታየ የመጣ ይመስለኛል፡፡ ልጆች በፍጡም የኛን ሙያ እየያዙት አይደለም ፡፡ ይህም በጅን-ያሳዝናል፡፡ መፈተሄም የሚያሻው ነው፡፡ ለምሳሌ ማሲንቆን አንግቶ የሚታይ ልጅ የለም፡፡ እንዲያንጎራጉርም እምብዛም ነው ፡፡

It is easy to deduce that the future of the *azmari* profession is in jeopardy. The young are not interested in the art. Sticking to such a profession is considered “backward”. Listening and watching this is the saddest experience, it is very rare to see the one with the *mesenqo* in rural Burbau and Waken, Wagara (interview with Berie Fulie, Sisay Bogale, and Worku Gessesse).

Another dilemma is related to the institution of marriage. In earlier times marriage between an *azmari* and a non-*azmari* was unlikely, which partly encouraged the *azmari* self-designation, but after the revolution, inter-marriage between the *azmari* and the non-*azmari* has been widely practiced, particularly by the youth. Yet, the relaxation of such endogamic rules also pushed the offspring of these 'mixed' couples to abandon any interest for a career as an *azmari*.

In fact, there is a sharp decline in the literary tradition of the *azmari* versification. The *azmari* tradition used to be well acknowledged in history and the *azmari* were honored in public for their ambiguity, satirical skills and their dexterity in composing poems. Yet today the quality of songs and poems in terms of their message and artistic beauty seems to have diminished. This may have other related causes. The development of a music industry, for instance, abated indirectly against the less wealthy (interview with Abebe Ayele, Yalew Melese, Worku Gessesse, and Berie Fulie). Thus, those who have enough funds to produce cassettes can potentially control the market. The mass introduction of radio and television since 1990s can also be seen as a threat to the *azmari* folk music.

MIGRATION

The seventeen year-long incessant civil war (1974-1991) between the military government and opposition groups coupled with natural catastrophes pushed a myriad of Ethiopians into the exile to the neighboring states and beyond. More than a million Ethiopian nationals fled to Djibouti, Sudan, Somalia and Kenya. Sizable numbers of refugees left to America and Europe. In the United States, for instance, about 40,000 Ethiopian exiles settled in New York City, Los Angeles and Washington D.C. (Henze, 1984). This mass migration was composed of various groups of people but an important share was that of the highly educated. This sizable Diaspora community soon started to long for the homeland as they suffered from a feeling of detachment from their place of origin, their culture and their people. Thus, many *azmari* youngsters and prominent figures were invited to perform for the Diaspora abroad and evoke their nostalgia by *tizita* ('remembrance', 'remembering', 'memoirs') songs and other cultural songs and dances. Such situations also created better financial opportunities and acceptance for the *azmari*⁹. The local public aspiration for folk music is also witnessed in various *azmari bet* (*azmari* night clubs) in Gondar and other smaller towns (see also Solomon, 2012; informants: Bere Fulie and Sisay Bogale).

A n informant had the following to say regarding the improved life of the *azmari* at home and abroad as part of the Ethiopian Diaspora community: ከአዝማሪዎች ጋር አሁን እኩል ነን። ብንፈልጋቸውም አይገኙም፤ ኑሯቸው በድሎት ነው። ተፈላጊ ሆነዋል የሚኖሩት በባህር ማዶ ፈረንጅ አገር ነው። ኑሯቸውና ትድረታቸው የፈረንጅ እየሆነ ነው (‘Now there is no discrepancy between us and the *azmari*. We are equal.

9. Had it not been for the positive changes occurred during the Revolution regarding the *Azmari*, the present generation musicians would have been reluctant to join the music profession” (Solomon, 2012, p. 12).

This time we can't find them to establish partnership. Their life is lavish. They are rather in abroad for the rest of the world (informant: Werku Gessesse).

Today, the non-azmari vocalists are emerging icons who organize music concerts for diaspora communities abroad. Among the most famous from within the area of Gondar can be mentioned and they are Abebe Birhane, his wife Feqreadis Neqatibeb, Asefu Debalke, Netsanet Melese, Madingo Afework and his family, Eniye Takele, Shamble Belayneh, Fasil Demoze, and Amsal Mitike. This situation has created a comfortable position for the profession and the revival of Ethiopian secular folk music both at home and abroad. Today a musician or an artist seems more respected and sought after in the public sphere (interview with Tilahun Melese, Yalew Melese, Worku Gessesse, and Berie Fulie; Solomon, 2012).

Public aspiration for folk music is also important. In spite of the apparent dominance of modern music today, for making a party more colorful the presence of the *azmari* is still highly required. It is usual in Gondar or elsewhere to take guests to the *azmari* bet to be entertained with folk culture (interview with Tilahun Melese, Sisay Bogale, Worku Gessesse, and Berie Fulie). In Gondar city, the 'Korahu bebahile' ('Pride in my culture') *azmari* association plays an important role in entertainment and visualizing the *azmari* tradition in the area. However, their artistic skills pale in comparison with their nearest ancestors, the Fasiledes *kinet* and even more so with the more distant ones who prowled during imperial times.

CONCLUSION

This study has covered a chapter in the contemporary history of the *azmari* community in the north Gondar region, from 1974 to 1991. The paper has shown the crucial role played by the *azmari* as an elite member of the society during the revolution. The study focused on the changes encountered by the *azmari* in the Gondar region. The Derg regime lured the *azmari* with a clear strategy; these professionals were employed to bridge the gap between the public and the state during the formative years of the revolution. The military junta focused on these groups as agents of transformation and used their skills in creating the local musical bands known as *kinet*.

Indeed, the Derg worked with enthusiasm to establish "new and progressive culture" according to the principles of scientific socialism. Besides, the junta used the *kinet* system to awaken the Ethiopian people through the flame of the rich culture of each region and locality in the country. Their primary objective was to create awareness on the "cultural imperialism" which was considered as alien and oppressive. Mobilizing the Ethiopian mass towards the unity by fostering values of a strong psychic 'masculine' and fearful nation was also part of the political agenda. Similarly, the state strove to introduce each region and its peoples via their artistic traditions, including music and performance arts. The international tours that Ethiopian artists made in various countries of the world also served for the purposes of image building and of showing the hitherto untapped culture of

the nation.

Finally, the revolution also greatly contributed to break the deadlock in which the music profession and the art in general were found during the imperial regime; indeed, until the revolution musicians were typically perceived as outcasts, people with supernatural powers, belonging to a race and origin different from the rest of the community. Thereafter, the profession of the *azmari* became a source of pride and dignity and it was no longer marked as taboo. Today, music and the arts have become among the most sought-after professions. Yet, the changes have also brought about threats to such traditional occupations as the *azmari*. For instance, the curriculums in primary education and at other levels are oblivious of such traditional skills. This acts negatively upon the *azmari* tradition in its indigenous form and type. This research recommends the establishment of folk music schools and training centers at least around the historic *azmari* villages such as Burbuax to ensure the continuity of this unique culture.

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Appendix 1 Interviews

Name	Age	Date of Interview	Place of Interview	Remarks
Abebe Ayele (agafari)	87	3/1/2013	Gondar	He was one among the dignified court personnel in the imperial era as <i>agafari /yelfign askelkay/</i> . He has detailed knowledge on the <i>azmari</i> tradition of those times. He also shared his dairies on the <i>azmari</i> verses and their meanings.
Bere Fulie (azmari)	65	11 / 10 / 2014	Gondar	He is an <i>azmari</i> from weken, Wagara. He shared his detailed knowledge on the <i>azmari</i> tradition in imperial Gondar and the Derg regime
Etiyum Hiwot (w/ro)	59	23/12/2014	Aykel	She is originally from Wagara and was living for more than 30 years in Aykel. She has huge knowledge on the <i>azmari</i> tradition in Wagara and Gondar. She was also a member of <i>kebele kinet</i> in the Derg time.
Gedefaye Yohannes (azmari)	47	12/3/2014	Burbuax	Professionally he is both a farmer and an <i>azmari</i> in Burbuax Kebele and he shared his great deal of knowledge on the revolution and the <i>azmari</i> life.
Getachew Welay (ato)	62	3/2/2015	Maksegnit	A farmer well informed in the <i>azmari</i> traditions during both the imperial and Derg eras.
Hailu Eshetie (ato)	68	4/4/2015	Dabat (Wegara)	A farmer who shared his knowledge on the <i>azmari</i> profession in historical perspective and the changes after 1974.
Kemal Mustofa Ato	85	6/1/2015	Aykel	A weaver and merchant. He has shared his knowledge of the <i>azmari</i> tradition in Gondar in general. He also shared his experience of <i>kinet</i> during the Derg period.
Mebre Belete (azmari)	57	2/9/2013	Burbuax	He is well informed of the value of music for the society. He was a member of the <i>kebele kinet</i> and he shared his knowledge on the change and the continuity of the <i>azmari</i> culture in the contemporary time.
Mulu Alemu	40	1/4/2014	Gondar	She is originally from Gondar. She shared her detailed experience on the <i>azmari</i> tradition.
Mulu Berhe (w/ro)	65	3/6/2015	Gondar	She is a housewife who grew up within the <i>azmari</i> tradition. She shared both the imperial and Derg experience of the <i>azmaries</i> .
Mulu worku (Ato)	60	4/1/2015	Gondar	She is from Dembia with detailed knowledge of imperial land tenure and the Derg. She shared her experiences with passion.

Name	Age	Date of Interview	Place of Interview	Remarks
Radu Bizuneh (emahoy)	83	2/1/2014	Gondar	A native to Chilga, she is well informed of the <i>azmari</i> tradition during the imperial and Derg periods.
Shimeles Demlew (ato)	70	1/1/2015	Gondar	He was originally from Semien and held office during imperial era. He has detailed knowledge and experience on the <i>azmari</i> tradition in both regimes. He also shared his dairies of verses generously.
Sisay Bogale (ato)	75	4/1/2015	Burbaux	He is an <i>azmari</i> by profession not by birth. He joined the profession and was disowned by his family in the imperial era. He shared his substantive knowledge of the <i>azmari</i> and the rest of the people in the imperial and Derg periods. He is the leading story teller in contemporary Burbuax.
Sitina Mustefa (w/ro)	72	4/1/2014	Aykel	She is from Chilga and well informed of the <i>azmari</i> tradition in Gondar. She has very good ability and skill of rehearsing <i>azmari</i> poems and Gondarine dancing.
Tekalign Mulugeta (azmari)	48	1/2/2014	Enfranz	Originally from Burbuax, he has good memory of events. He shared his experience on the <i>azmari</i> tradition. He is currently a member of <i>korahu bebahle mesnko techewachoch mahiber</i> .
Tilahun Melese	56	2/2/2015	Koladiba	A farmer and native to Dembia, he shared detailed knowledge of the <i>azmari</i> tradition in Gondar.
Wagnaw Tebeje	78	2/1/2014	Gondar	He is a member of North Gondar Patriots Association who is well informed of <i>azmari</i> verses and traditions.
Worku Gessesse	89	1/2/2015	Birhala (Dembia)	A veteran of the Italian times, he is knowledgeable on the <i>azmari</i> culture. He has a number of <i>azmari</i> friends in the imperial times and the Derg as well.
Yalew Melse (ato)	39	3/2/2015	Gondar	Officer at the Culture and Tourism office in North Gondar zone, he shared his experience on the <i>azmari</i> tradition in Gondar area and the zone.

Appendix 2

Letter written in 1980 from Gojjam and Gondar government branch office to Gondar province administration congratulating the remarkable job accomplished by Gondar Fasiledes *kinet*. Although always suffering from financial and administrative troubles, the *kinet* assumed the role of highest performing cultural institution in the country. The letter also encourages the need to work with great determination to alleviate wage issues deeply prevalent in the team.



